

1950s and early 1960s. Equally important, there has been a virtual moratorium on political arrests and trials, although short-term detention of demonstrators and other activists continues. And in the past year, a series of potentially significant reforms have been discussed openly in the Soviet press or placed on the legislative agenda, among them: dismantling the system of internal exile; redrafting the criminal code to repeal some of the laws used to imprison dissidents; providing detainees with pretrial access to lawyers; and eliminating capital punishment.

The creation last year of a Soviet human rights commission, which has held a series of unprecedented meetings with Western groups, including Helsinki Watch, was a sign that the Soviet government recognizes the legitimacy of Western human rights concerns. The similarities between the ideas of this official commission, headed by Fyodor Burlatsky, an adviser to Mikhail Gorbachev, and those of the unofficial Committee for Human Rights created in the early 1970s by Sakharov and other dissidents are striking.

There are other signs of the broadening discussion and the growing tolerance of unofficial sentiment. The views of former dissidents such as Larissa Bogoraz and historian Roy Medvedev, and émigrés such as Vladimir Voinovich and Lev Kopelev are being published in the official press. And "informal" groups, including the nationalistic Front groups in the Baltic republics, proliferate, suggesting the outlines of a civil society. While many of the more than 30,000 informal groups are concerned with culture, the environment and the preservation of historical monuments, many are also overtly political. A few years ago, such groups would have been suppressed by the K.G.B. and their members jailed. Now they are accepted, although some of their most prominent members have been harassed or attacked in the press.

These and other changes in the Soviet Union should force a rethinking of tired cold war assumptions and make it tougher for the Bush Administration—and the media—to use human rights rhetoric to fuel anti-Sovietism.

J.F.K.'s Legacy

Camelot had a short run. The political performance, rather than the musical play, was vastly more admired in retrospect than in full swing, and if it were not for the tragic curtain twenty-five years ago in Dallas, the memory of that brief period would doubtless have a different cast. The dreamy, Arcadian quality of the thousand days of John Kennedy is an attribute of national re-vision, a nostalgic remembrance of things past not necessarily as they were but as they came to be seen. Casals in the White House, Jackie in Paris, the Peace Corps and the bravado in Berlin. That is the stuff that filters through the scrim of history, and makes a myth that is now inextricable from the reality of the Kennedy time.

We are used to thinking of our past in neat terms of presidential administrations, an atavistic conceit, perhaps, derived from the tradition of naming historical periods after royal reigns. Certainly there was a Kennedy Era—even if

there never was an Arthurian Age—but it was not entirely determined by executive decree or shaped by presidential model. John Kennedy was elected at a grand turning point in the history of the nation and a transformative moment in the development of its social culture. The imperial system was running at peak-performance levels. The national economy, which had soared on postwar domestic consumption, was poised to expand in the Third World and command a global market. The first postmodern generation was reaching puberty and already thinking thoughts and doing deeds that shocked its elders.

Kennedy stood astride those trends, alternately bucked and used them, and never achieved full mastery. A hard cold warrior from the start, he risked nuclear war more than once (the Berlin crisis and the Cuban missile crisis) and never grasped the possibilities of Nikita Khrushchev's reforms, which prefigured Gorbachev's by a quarter-century. For most of his term he was an implacable enemy of the Cuban revolution and encouraged plots of assassination and subversion to reverse it. The noble ideas embodied in the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress were sacrificed to the *Realpolitik* of worldwide counterinsurgency warfare, and finally contradicted by the brutal and self-defeating devastation of Vietnam. Kennedy may have realized the folly of his project in his last hours (JFK devotees grasp at the American University speech of June 10, 1963, as evidence of an anti-interventionist conversion), but he enters the history books as a warmonger not a peacemaker, and a counterrevolutionary not a liberator.

In the liberal Democratic tradition established by Roosevelt and Truman, Kennedy sought to extend welfare to needy groups not covered by the New and Fair Deals, particularly to the elderly and the poor, with Medicare and Medicaid passed shortly after his death. It is worth recalling that those worthy programs had the somewhat contradictory effect of pre-empting and thus removing the issue of comprehensive national health care (the frightening concept of socialized medicine, which Truman raised in 1948) from the national social agenda. Kennedy sent Federal marshals and Administration satraps to the South to protect black and white activists who had been laying their lives on the line for integration since the mid-1950s. But when Kennedy asked to speak at the March on Washington in 1963, the organizers refused, believing that the "white power structure" of national politics should remain the object of civil rights protest, not become a symbolic co-belligerent for the purposes of co-optation. August 28 became Martin Luther King Jr.'s day, not John F. Kennedy's.

What Kennedy did better than any President since Roosevelt, and what makes him a special kind of leader in American annals, was to mobilize a broad generational constituency—even if he was unable, by fate or his own limitations, to direct it to significant political change in his lifetime. There was no Kennedy Revolution. Kennedy's greatness now consists of some parts myth and sentiment, but his leadership went beyond mere celebrity and style, and it is doubtful that we will see such sparkle in the White House before the century ends.

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